



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Deval L. Patrick
GOVERNOR

Timothy P. Murray
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Ian A. Bowles
SECRETARY

Tel: (617) 626-1000
Fax: (617) 626-1181
<http://www.mass.gov/envir>

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Contact: Lisa Capone, EEA
(617) 626-1109
Layla D'Emilia-Shepherd,
EOPS
(617) 727-7775 ext. 25560

Massachusetts Public Safety and Energy Officials Urge Stronger Federal Oversight in Nuclear Plant License Renewals

State officials point to power reliability and safety issues in letter to Nuclear Regulatory Commission

BOSTON – Citing concern for public safety and the reliability of the Commonwealth's electric power supply, Patrick Administration officials today called on the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to address recently identified shortcomings in the agency's power plant license renewal process before proceeding with relicensing of several plants, including the Pilgrim nuclear power plant in Plymouth.

In a letter to NRC Chairman Dale E. Klein and other NRC officials, Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Ian Bowles and Secretary of Public Safety and Security Kevin Burke pointed to issues raised in an audit report by the US Office of the Inspector General, which concluded that the NRC's License Renewal Program "lacks a complete report quality assurance process to ensure documentation of the staff's aging management program review methodology and substantive support for staff conclusions."

In their letter, Bowles and Burke noted that the IG's audit "finds that NRC staff frequently simply repeats the exact language provided by the licensee respecting safety issues." While it is "theoretically possible" that NRC staff adequately reviews the safety of aging nuclear plants before issuing license renewals, "its own documentation of the review process suggests strongly to the contrary. Given the importance of the safety reviews associated with nuclear plant relicensing, these conclusions are disturbing, to say the least," the state officials wrote.

Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley also sent a letter to the NRC today, raising similar concerns.

Pilgrim's existing license is due to expire in 2012, and the NRC is currently considering renewal through 2032. Just a few miles over the northern border of western Massachusetts, the Vermont Yankee plant also has its license renewal pending. Bowles and Burke noted that safety issues that could have been foreseen and addressed in an orderly fashion during the relicensing of Pilgrim, Vermont Yankee or other Northeast nuclear power plant might cause unscheduled plant outages, putting at risk the reliability of the Commonwealth's electric power supply.

Pointing out that states rely on the NRC to assure the safety of plants that have applied for relicensing and that public officials of Vermont, New York, and Connecticut have recently made similar requests to the NRC, Bowles and Burke called on the agency to immediately address concerns raised by the Inspector General's audit and to provide assurances that plants will not be relicensed until the license renewal process is "robust and fully independent."

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